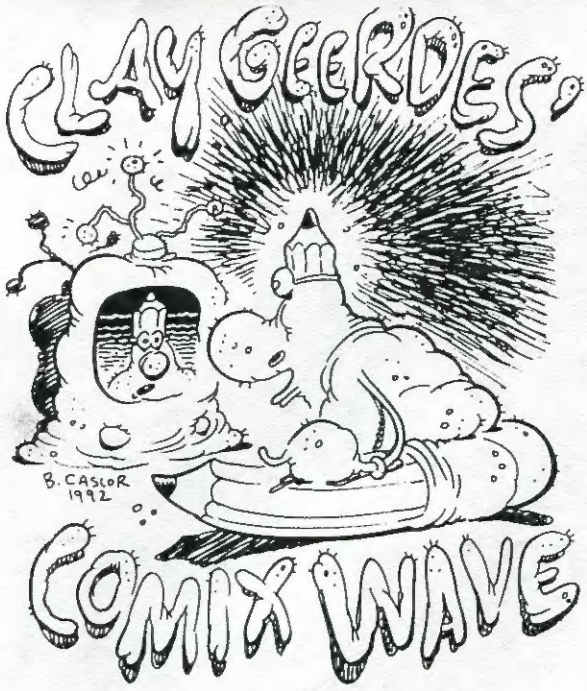

Most of the people drawing comics are men. And men like to look at women. They like to draw them the way they imagine them. Fantasy women. Perfect bodies. One of the masters in the 1940s was a man named Matt Baker. He drew for Fiction House. Lots of jungle queens and rich heiresses-cum-heroines. AC has reprinted several collections of his work in the **SKY GAL** series. The idea in those days was to show a beautiful woman in all the possible poses and to justify this she had to be in action all the time. **SKY GAL** worked as a waitress in an airfield diner and in every story she managed to get into the kind of trouble that had her fighting the bad guys, often on the wings of planes. If you think this formula ended when Fiction House folded, think again. I've reprinted a page from Erik Larsen's **SAVAGE DRAGON** 9 [April, 1994] to show that comic fantasy doesn't change very much from decade to decade. This juxtaposition of then and now also suggests that the repressive branch of feminism has had little effect on the younger generation of comic artists. --Clay Geerdes, May, 1994.

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WONDER CON '94

What did I notice at Wonder Con this year? Well, I saw a lot of Image comics selling at cut-rate prices. Ditto Valients and Defiants and various other independents. What this means to me is that someone is glutting a saturated market. At a con, successful books are never on sale at less than cover price and it's more common to see them marked up. I'm skeptical about comic book inflation. I see most of it was manipulation. There is a lot of corruption in the latest Overstreet Guide and in the business in general, but in the main what I see is comic collecting shifting class-level. Many books are simply not going to be available to the lower echelon any more. Auctions at Southeby's in New York have drawn the attention of the wealthier people who collect and I suspect in the next few years all of the Golden and Silver age comics will vanish into the vaults.

I saw a lot of younger people sitting in front of fortunes in Golden Age books. Now these people never bought those comics at the drugstore and lovingly protected them from aging, read them over, showed them to friends, took pleasure in owning them; they inherited them and want to turn them into cash. Fine, a game of store, but it has nothing to do with the love of the medium many of us have. I used to visit with some of the guys who had those Golden Age books and I remember talking about the times and the characters with them. When I see a twenty-year-old guy sitting with all those books, I know I've lost a friend to death or the rest home, that's what it feels like from my end. I walked around Wonder Con hearing stories of sickness and death, remembering all the people I'll never see again, folks like Jack Kirby, Bob Clampett, Harvey Kurtzman, Wally Wood, cartoonists too numerous to list.

For all that, I'm not really down this year. Just introspective. I stopped to visit with Dan O'Neill for a minute and found out he was faxing his strip to the **Bay Guardian** each week. High tech funnies. Near him, Larry Welz had a model handing out Cherry trading cards. At the other end of the room was a model in a red Vampirella costume, posing and signing. A tough looking playmate of the month was signing something across the room. When I passed her, she looked like she had lost her way on the Sunset Strip and wandered too far north. There was free Fleer's bubble gum and Topps had a large display this year promoting trading cards. Image was giving out free postcards and posters. An entire section of the Dealer's room was devoted to video games [which I hate]. Corporate linkage at work. Marvel allied with Nintendo. Brain crunching. I bought a shirt Sergio Aragones drew for the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund. I heard announcements for panels I never attended. I'm not patient enough to sit and listen to hours of industry hype promoted as entertainment. I like to see the real people, but a glimpse of them walking around is enough. I'm not interested in how long it takes them to come up with an idea that is acceptable to the editorial board or how long it takes someone to ink a Spider Man swipe and I leave all those terminally long bullshit discussions about who is suing who for what to **THE COMICS JOURNAL**. One of the problems with having a Pro's-only conference prior to Wonder Con is that the people who have been on the scene talking business and power-lunching all week look tired out by the time Wonder Con opens. I saw Pros who were having a hard time keeping their eyes open. Not that I blame them. Why open your eyes only to see one more geeky kid shoving product in your face for the millionth autograph?

I walk and look at Japanese action figures and old plastic toys from the fifties and I learn what is valued and what is not. Action figures. There's a joke, huh? These plastic pieces of rot just cost money and lay around. No *action* to them at all. $5 for a **Dick Tracy** video. Didn't anybody like Warren Beatty as Dick? Guess not. Saw comics advertised as half off Guide which means they were marked way up in the first place. Saw a **MAD 1** for $2,000. Probably cheap compared to next year's price. Saw *Comicbase*, a nice program on sale for about a hundred. I considered it, but I would have to put in all my underground and newave comix and I'm not really interested in reading someone else's rap about Superman, Batman, et al on the little screen. There was another group selling computer information, mostly to dealers. We are all in so many databases these days. Electronic junk mail is the wave of the future. To find a little useful information on Internet, you have to wade through tons of useless rot. After all, any idiot can log on and run off at the key all night long, dumping copies in any open Mail box.

I did see a lot of alternative or newave comic book action and I think that aspect of comics is live and well. People have learned that they can produce a few copies of anything via computer or xerox and spread these among their own circle of friends, having a good time in the process and ignoring the big business of comic books [superhero maintenance for the eternally pubescent]. It felt good to me to see these racks of minis and DZs. It is a fact that many of the bigger companies are going to come crashing down in the next few years. Bankruptcy on the way. Those who mistakenly think they can ignore the economic law of diminishing returns are in for enlightenment in the nineties. The tricks work for a little while, but they do not sustain a business over the long run. You can cheat the kids with double covers and double-numbering and mini-series and crossovers and Zero issues and carbon copy universes and multiverses but only for a little while. The kids get wise and when they dump all that shit back on the market and find there are no buyers, only sellers, I suspect a lot of comic book moguls will be back bagging groceries or working on data entry in one of those windowless fluorescent rooms.

Here's a tidbit. Half Price Books, a chain with two outlets here in Berkeley, has been selling back issue comic books for half-price. What is this going to do to a business based upon artificial inflation of back issues? What most of the regular comic book stores do is raise the price of an issue each time a new one comes out. If I can go over to Half-Price and buy the Image and Valient comics for half, why would I go and pay double somewhere else?

Re Image and other independent companies, Overstreet is totally wrong on the back issue prices of these books. No dealer I know is selling any **SPAWNS** or **SHADOWHAWKS** or **SHADOWMANS** for the low figures listed in Overstreet, so the current generation can no longer use Overstreet as a valid guide when collecting comics. There are actually several different Guides around now and one young dealer looked at me cynically and said, "Fuck Overstreet. Why the hell should I let this guy tell me what to charge for my books? Who is he anyway? Just some

guy who tried to run the whole scene back in the seventies. He's not happening now."

What has been happening for several years now is that the majors, Marvel and DC, have been challenged successfully by several companies and instead of *setting* the trends, they have begun to *follow* them. I see Marvel and DC characters these days which are imitations of the style used by Mike Lee and Rob Liefeld and Todd McFarland. It's not that the old-line superheroes are not holding their own; after all, they have megabucks promoting them with TV and product-tie-ins and it would be nearly impossible to grow up not knowing who Superman and Spider Man are, but more and more young kids have a heightened awareness of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and the Mighty Morphen Power Rangers. The establishment superheroes mean little to the kids and to deal with this many companies shifted toward a more adult audience, particularly after the underground and alternative breakthrough of the early seventies. The Superman of today is designed to appeal to adults more than little kids. I was reading Superman when I was five or six in a time when no adult would touch a comic book. Today's adult looks with disdain on the Turtles and Power Rangers the little kids love. The humor and ideas in the **LOIS AND CLARK** series is adult.

Overstreet demonstrates this generation gap better than anyone. He lists the first edition of **TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES** for $250 mint. Good luck. I don't know anyone that would sell one for that. **TMNT 1** is the **ACTION 1** of its generation. In a few years people will be paying thousands of dollars for those early black and white turtles. The mass produced Images, etc., on the other hand will be in the quarter bins, with a handful of exceptions. There were only about 3,000 of those early turtles. That's a rare comic book.

A trend I see in progress is pressure from the major distributors to put small retail stores out of business in favor of larger chains. You can read about this in detail in **TCJ**, but ask any dealer. To survive as a comic book store today, you have to carry the latest titles and to get those that sell well you have to order a lot that don't. You also have to pay the bills whether the books sell or not. Most small stores do not have warehouse space to store thousands of unsold books. I predict specialty stores, antique comic stores, and chain outlets in the malls which will carry only the majors and ignore all the small companies. The dealer may make a killing on a big hype like the Death of Superman, but it costs him in the long run. I saw dozens of those Superman titles at the Con for as low as a quarter apiece! And is the Overstreet Guide in phase? Hell, no. **SHAZAM** was a huge disaster back in the early seventies and you couldn't give those comic books again. There's a book truly worth "cover or less," yet it's listed at $4. Ha!

Not much Underground action at Wonder Con. Only Last Gasp was present and even last Gasp has not come out with a major underground in the past few months. There has been no new **ZAP** or **HUP**. I saw Denis Kitchen on the floor, but his company has not focused on underground comix for quite awhile. He did publish a 25th anniversary edition of **PEOPLE'S COMICS** [a book Crumb did for his friend Terry Zwiegoff back in 1972], but the cover of Kitchen's latest catalog features Li'l Abner, a character who peaked in the forties, and most of his merchandise is nostalgia, not underground. I didn't see the Todds, so assume Rip Off Press skipped Wonder Con. A couple of dealers brought a box or two of old undergrounds, but most did not. Comic Relief had a Plymell **ZAP** listed for $800. I don't know whether it sold or not. Be interesting to see someone come to a con and display an underground collection. One would see an almost infinite variety of styles and subjects. What strikes me when I stand back and look at the Image display is how similar all the books look. Each character looks like a tracing of the other.

I didn't take my camera at all this year. In the past, I routinely took pictures of everyone. The result is I have a photo album that might be called the Underground Book of the Dead. I decided I didn't need any more pictures. Most of the folks I know are getting bigger and bigger and looking gray and craggy. Not the healthiest business working with comics. Artists tend to sit and draw for hours and hours and unless they have exercycles or force themselves to swim or jog they tend to develop all kinds of physical problems as they age. Some exacerbate these with nicotene and alcohol and caffeine and sugar. I would have taken a shot of Vampirella for you though, but I figure you've seen her before and if you ever go to a Con anywhere you're more than likely to see her again. The creator of Vampi wasn't even mentioned. Who he? Forrest Ackerman. There are those of us who remember the days of **FAMOUS MONSTERS OF FILMLAND** and the Warren post-EC horror books.

That's it. Thanks to Bryan Uhlenbrock and his staff for doing all the hard work, unsung heroes all.

--Clay Geerdes, April 26, 1994.

SKY GAL
"THE KIDNAP KAPER!"
WAM!
NO KIDDIN', GINGER MAGUIRE'S GOT A DATE AT LAST. BUT I'M S-(ER)- WITH A STACK OF DIRTY DISHES! SHE'S GOT TROUBLE, AND THERE'S MORE COMING WHEN SHE GETS DOWN FROM THOSE CLOUDS. JUST WAIT...
WAIT! THAT'S ALL I EVER DO, SHUCKS, I MIGHT AS WELL BE TAP HOLDING HANDS WITH THOSE DISHES BEFORE THE BOSS COMES AROUND TO—WHAT?
THEORY OF FLIGHT
ARE-ARE YOU JEEPERS
Art by MATT BAKER